

Approved by

Director

Robert F. White

Examining Committee

Francis A. [unclear]

Peter [unclear]

James [unclear]

FIVE STORIES

by

Judy Richardson Cox

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Approved by

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Robert W. Tson

Examining Committee

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Peter Lynch

James Ellis

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her that she thought Laff did not look very nice at all, especially in

that Jeanie stared at the wax figure of Mary Ann Lafferty laid out in a blue satin lined coffin across the room. The body reminded her of a wax, darkly flesh-colored hand that some boy had shown her when she was ten, saying that it had been his grandfather's which he'd kept as a "remembrance." She remembered shuddering with disgust at touching the hand that had looked so real, yet so cold and so very, very impersonal. Even though she had known that the touch of it was too waxen and smooth to be real, she had felt nauseated at the idea of it. (That's why she had refused to save her tonsils, to preserve them in a jar like pickles.) Now she was imagining that Laff was a wax doll up there, and not the real thing at all - just like the hand. Someone had slipped the wax doll into the coffin, fooling them all. It was some kind of a joke to prove the little girl - though four years older now - to be still naive, still frightened at the lack of warmth in death. "What are we waiting for? For Laff to get up?" But

Around her the relatives were whispering harshly, at times raising their voices slightly - forgetting - then lowering their conversations again with a glance at Laff and quickly lowered eyes. The man next to Jeanie stared silently as did she. She considered turning to him to ask, "Don't you think your niece looks like a wax doll from Madame Tussaud's instead of like Mary Ann Lafferty from Wade?" But she couldn't; he probably wouldn't think so anyway; and besides, there was Mrs. Lafferty who was so nice - and so drugged to kill the knowledge of Laff's being gone - up there by the coffin. Mrs. Lafferty had asked

Jeanie as she first came in to view the body, "Doesn't she look nice, though, just as if she were sleeping." And Jeanie couldn't have told her that she thought Laff did not look very nice at all; especially in that blue, frilly gown she would have never worn had she been alive. What if Mrs. Lafferty should overhear her now, asking Laff's uncle if he didn't agree that it wasn't really Laff at all but some sort of changeling?

She kept the silence and tried to focus her attention on the too many, too heavy smelling flowers behind and to the side of the coffin. She couldn't find the ones she and Donna had sent. It didn't matter because they'd sent only a small bunch anyhow. If Jeanie had known there would be so many, she wouldn't even have sent those. She turned her gaze from the flowers to the group of relatives and friends around her - like a section of an audience waiting for a play to begin, talking softly, glancing occasionally, expectantly, at the stage to see if the curtain would rise soon. "Only now," she thought, "there will be no curtain going up, just an audience waiting, watching for an already canceled play. What are we waiting for? For Laff to get up?" But she knew better, and so, she imagined, did the wax doll which would not rise, not even blink an eye as Jeanie had thought Laff had seemed to do once tonight. (She had been mistaken; it was her own self blinking, but certainly not Laff.) She wanted to scream or do something to make this horrible, stiff viewing be over. She wished the metal folding chairs on which they sat would just fold up with everyone still sitting in them. The undertaker could pack the chairs and the folded-up people in a corner of a back room and it would be as though none

of them had ever existed - Lafferty included.

She looked for Donna. Maybe Donna would be doing something; she always seemed to know the right thing as Jeanie did not. They'd been a trio before, but now they couldn't be anymore. Maybe she and Donna would become a duet now, But Jeanie could not be sure that duet would be the same at all. Donna was so, well, prim, and not half so much fun alone as when with Laff. (In the car coming to the viewing tonight, Jeanie had realized that maybe now the two of them might not understand each other without Lafferty between. Jeanie had been angry with her mother the whole time her mom was driving the girls to the viewing. She realized now how silly it had been, but it had seemed important then. She had planned to wear her mother's black suit, but it was too long in the sleeves and skirt when she had put it on. There hadn't been any time to fix it. She had blamed her mother for having said she could wear the suit when she should have known it wouldn't fit. She had had to wear her navy blue and felt that by not wearing black she'd insulted Laff. And when they got into the car, she looked at the clock in the dashboard and found they would be late because she had changed clothes. When they picked up Donna, it was fifteen till seven. The viewing was to start at seven. She had heckled her mother the whole way with, "Hurry up, Mother, we'll be late. Can't we ever be on time?" and "Can't you pass him, PLEASE, Mother!" Donna had remonstrated quietly, "But, Jeanie, it doesn't matter if we're a little late. They'll understand." Jeanie had mumbled, "Yes, it will. It will matter." But how she couldn't have said; she knew that you could enter a viewing or leave at any time, but she needed to be there. Donna just didn't

understand and Jeanie could not explain her anger - Laff would have known, and would have fixed it between them. Her mother had not scolded her for her rudeness, or seemed to be upset. Jeanie had thought she would have to be made to apologize to Donna. She was very thankful she had not; she was just as sorry as Donna even if she couldn't show it so well. Her mother had only said, "I'll come back at eight to see Mrs. Lafferty for a minute and to wait for you until you're ready, Jeanie," and had driven off. She and Donna had arrived at five minutes to seven; the priest was thirty minutes late.)

Donna was standing at the very back of the room, quiet and inconspicuous in the strain and noise surrounding her, with her head facing front, towards the flowers and her eyes closed, she was moving her lips silently. "She's praying," Jeanie scolded herself. "So why can't I pray too? Only prayer doesn't mean anything to me tonight." She defended herself. "I just can't pray now." When the priest came, he had asked for Hail Mary's from his audience. They had said so many and said them so quickly that Jeanie, disillusioned at the lack of force she had expected of the prayers, could see no use in them. Laff was dead; she was either someplace or no place, and prayers were so futile now. She felt guilty, though, knowing that most people, Donna included, would not feel that way. For Donna a prayer was immediate help for Laff. Jeanie wondered if that was what Laff would be wanting now, if she wanted anything. Donna was crying too; there was one visible, glistening drop caught in the light on her right cheek. Again Jeanie was ashamed; she had cried only once, and then only in a flurry of hurried, nonsensical tears.

(She'd been to town yesterday to buy Laff a get-well card since Laff had been absent from school for so long now. And she had found precisely the right card, too. It should have had "Exclusively for Mary Ann Lafferty" stamped across it because it couldn't have been right for anybody else. A sick teddy bear (Lafferty looked like a thin teddy bear) was sitting up in his bed coughing, and an old lady with a sweet, gentle face came up behind him and whacked him one, yelling, "Get well, dammit!" Jeanie, excited at her find, had brought it home to show her mother before mailing it. Her mother had been sitting in the dining room by the phone, looking puzzled, it had seemed to Jeanie. When she had spoken, it had been in a hushed, tender quality that her mother rarely used. "Jeanie, sit down, honey," she had said. Jeanie had sensed the tension in the tone of voice. She sat down hard in the opposite chair. "I've had a call from Mrs. Lafferty just now." She touched her daughter's hand, but withdrew it quickly, as if she knew that Jeanie would not want that kind of sympathy. "Laff died this afternoon. She started to -" she glanced quickly at Jeanie and then away into the kitchen. "She started one of her coughing spells and couldn't stop and -" ~~she did not keep her eyes away from Jeanie~~

"You're lying!" Jeanie had screamed, as soon as her mind, elated with the get-well card, grasped what it was her mother was saying. "You're lying!" And she had stomped up the stairs to her bedroom, angry. Only when she sat down on the bed, had she remembered the card that was still in her hand and reread it. The card seemed dead. She could see only the teddy bear coughing and coughing, and the old lady slapping his back shouting, "Get well, dammit." But it wasn't a funny

card any more. The bear kept on his coughing. She had cried then, but unevenly and hurriedly. She was soon composed enough to be sorry she'd been so rude to her mother.) That was the only cry she had had. She could not cry as Donna was crying now; maybe she had no feeling, maybe she was incapable. ~~Some old navy blue skirt and blazer that~~

Outside she heard the cars go by on the highway. One pulled onto the gravel drive by the funeral home. "Maybe it's mother," Jeanie hoped, "and it's almost over. I can go home and get away from this. I can do some history and forget." The whispering had not stopped, nor did it as the outside door opened and someone walked into the hallway and, after a pause, into the room. Jeanie, sitting on the aisle, turned and drew in her breath sharply when she saw Miss Anka. The robust figure walked up the aisle, tripped over a slight crack in the floor, and reached out a hand to balance herself on Jeanie's shoulder. Steadied, she squeezed the shoulder compassionately and walked on. ~~immediately enfolded her into its grasp. Enfolded, the~~

Jeanie didn't want to laugh; she knew it would be cruel and very out of place. She breathed deeply and bit her lips hard to stop the smile from forming. But she could not keep her eyes away from the gym teacher who was now talking to Mrs. Lafferty, holding her hand so that Jeanie could have almost imagined Miss Anka teaching Mrs. Lafferty the correct way to serve a tennis ball. Jeanie rose quickly, scraping her chair back. In the hallway she breathed more freely, but could not stop the laughter. Lafferty had intensely disliked Miss Anka for making her wear clean, white sneakers when the style was to wear dirty ones. She had imitated Miss Anka's awkward, duck-like waddle behind her back

in gym class and cheated in the after-class showers by not going through the whole shower stall, but running to the end and only getting her back wet - no more. She had never been nice to Miss Anka; yet Miss Anka was the only teacher here. And in those same clothes she wore in gym all the time - the same old navy blue skirt and blazer that she had appeared in yesterday - only the sneakers and socks were changed for a pair of hose and low baby heels. "Perhaps that's why she tripped onto me," Jeanie whispered to herself. "She probably isn't used to wearing heels. It's not real, oh, it can't be real, this funeral and her being here," she mumbled, having abruptly quit laughing. She walked to the end of the hall confused at her own reactions and drank three gulps of water from the fountain. "I must go back in there and be still," she told herself firmly, and keeping her eyes on her feet, she began the walk back to the viewing room. "If only I keep looking down, I won't see her anymore and I'll be al-" she bumped into a hard flesh which immediately enfolded her into its grasp. Enfolded, the flesh became softer, comforting to Jeanie, so much so that for one second she thought this must be her mother. But only for a second. Raising her head, smothered, and struggling to get free from the tightness of the grasp, Jeanie's head knocked against Miss Anka's collar bone. She came away dizzy, gasping in surprise at the nauseating fragrance of too many flowers and Tweed perfume.

"Oh, Miss Anka, excuse me, Miss Anka. I - I guess I wasn't watching where I was going." Jeanie stared wildly at the gym teacher's hair to keep her eyes from the clothes, the stocky stance, and the sincere, pathetic face. But looking at the hair was no better; its

wiry greyness was disarranged even though the style was too short even for setting. Her head looked like a bird's nest made of straw. At the very crown, two stiff puffs of grey stood up as if the bird who made the nest had forgotten to tuck in the last two wisps. Jeanie backed away from the arms outstretched, from the lopsided, embarrassed smile. "Please forgive me, ma'am," she muttered almost unintelligibly, trying not to be heard in the next room.

"I understand, my dear," soothed the teacher awkwardly, her arms still reaching for the girl. "She thinks I am crying," Jeanie realized in an hysteria of alternately gasping laughter and breathing. She could not control its escaping from her.

"No, no, Miss Anka," was all that she could say by way of an explanation and then she ran from her without thinking.

After slamming the outer door, she stood on the top step of the funeral home trying to block out the picture of Miss Anka's outstretched hands. There was no more laughter, no feeling in the indifference of the night. So she sank to the step, knowing that she had behaved badly ever since she'd called her mother a liar. But now especially there was no excuse. She simply couldn't accept death. Such miserable stupidity. "I wish the chair had folded over me, that Miss Anka had never seen me laugh or cry or whatever she thought I was doing." She stared at the cars passing. She was more aware of them now than she had been on first coming outside, aware of her mother walking quickly up the steps, stooping down beside her in front of the funeral home.

"Do you want to go home now, Jeanie?" she asked. Jeanie looked at this face above hers and thankfully found nothing there for laughter.

"All she needed was her whistle, Mother. If she'd had her whistle hung on that neck-chain, if she'd blown it, I would have done

ten jumping jacks right there," she babbled.

Now they were lost and Brytte was not at all sure what to do about it. Being a girl scout, and on a camping trip at that, she knew she ought to have some ideas. But she did not; she had really no feelings at all about the situation except a disgust for Carol, whose fault it was, and an expectancy that just as soon as the rest of the campers discovered them missing, they would find them. They probably wouldn't be lost over half an hour, at most. If only she had gone on to be Squirrel's partner on the night hike, this wouldn't have happened; at least not to her, although it would have happened to anyone with Carol because she was such a prude. And this was the most important camping trip of Brytte's entire life so far; here she was on-ed camping with the ninth grade Explorer post from Marion and her own troop from Radnor. Well, and the counselors, of course. And now she had almost landed Squirrel - he'd held her hand on the afternoon hike, even after they'd only known each other since Friday. And on Saturday night, the most important night, and when she had gotten home to suggest a night hike (she couldn't suggest it herself and then walk with him; that would be too obvious) she had to let herself get stuck with old Carol. But how could she have helped, really? Nobody wanted to be Carol's partner, and Mrs. Lynx said that to go they all had to be on the buddy system. And she just hated it when no one would choose Carol, and she'd stand there so hurt every single time and even if it was Carol's own fault for being so fat and bossy and unlikeable; still, she'd be alone. So she'd huddled with Carol

and let Ann be with Squirrel. LOST couldn't like Ann, and besides, if

he realized why she had paired with Carol he would certainly understand.

Now they were lost and Brytte was not at all sure what to do about it. Being a girl scout, and on a camping trip at that, she knew she ought to have some ideas. But she did not; she had really worried and Carol would still not be left, leaving Ann. But she had no feelings at all about the situation except a disgust for Carol, whose fault it was, and an expectancy that just as soon as the rest of the campers discovered them missing, they would find them. They probably wouldn't be lost over half an hour, at most. If only she had gone on to be Squirrel's partner on the night hike, this wouldn't have happened; at least not to her, although it would have happened to anyone with Carol because she was such a prude. And this was the most important camping trip of Brytte's entire life so far; here she was co-ed camping with the ninth grade Explorer post from Merion and her own troop from Radnor. Well, and the counselors, of course. And now she had almost landed Squirrel - he'd held her hand on the afternoon hike, even after they'd only known each other since Friday. And on Saturday night, the most important night, and when she had gotten Anne to suggest a night hike (she couldn't suggest it herself and then walk with him; that would be too obvious) she had to let herself get stuck with old Carol. But how could she have helped, really? Nobody wanted to be Carol's partner, and Mrs. Lynam said that to go they all had to be on the buddy system. And she just hated it when no one would choose Carol, and she'd stand there so hurt every single time and even if it was Carol's own fault for being so fat and bossy and unlikeable; still, she'd be alone. So she'd buddied with Carol

and let Ann be with Squirrel - he couldn't like Ann, and besides, if he realized why she had paired with Carol he would certainly understand. She and Carol would walk right behind Ann and Squirrel anyhow, so she could talk with him and maybe after a little while they would switch partners and Carol would still not be left, having Ann. But she had not counted on Carol's whole selfish attitude to ruin everything."

The night had smelled so good with dusk almost over and half-darkness deepening into black woods. The leaders paired two behind the group and two ahead, and Brytte had maneuvered Carol and herself right behind Squirrel and Ann in the line. It had seemed so orderly and so perfect to Brytte, talking - almost babbling with happiness - to Squirrel and with him turning to smile and answer. She knew that when the hike was over they'd get back together at the campfire and hiking with Carol would be worth it. She'd never had a boyfriend before, and at fourteen it was about time. Squirrel was just great. But then Carol had spoiled it all by whispering to Brytte that if it was all the same, she didn't like that silly boy or Ann either one and she was moving back to the end of the group. At first Brytte had ignored her; she knew Carol could not just leave, that if she herself didn't follow, Carol would have to come back. But Carol did find a way after all. Stopping suddenly, grasping Brytte's arm, and crying,

"Brytte! Ouch! I have a stone in my shoe. It's awful and we've got to stop a minute," she pulled Brytte out of the line to the edge of the path. And Brytte had watched them passing by, the last three groups, while Carol untied her sneaker - and how, Brytte still wondered, did she ever get a stone in her sneaker - and shook it

vigorously to throw out the stone. Mrs. Lynam had come by with her partner from the explorer leaders and asked what the matter was, then gone on, telling them to hurry along and not lag behind the group. Even then, Brytte had not understood what Carol had done, so started trotting quickly to catch up again and get behind Squirrel.

"Hurry up, Carol. C'mon, so we can get our place back again."

"Oh, Brytte, I just can't go much faster," Carol had panted.

"And, besides, I don't want that place on the hike anymore. You talk too much to that Squirrel. You're supposed to be my partner." Brytte had slowed her pace to match Carol's, feeling very guilty; after all, if she had picked Carol for a partner, she should be nice to her, and maybe she was unfair to want to be with Squirrel. There was always the campfire when they returned. She just hoped he would not miss her now and think she had gone off on purpose. Straining in the increasing darkness, her eyes could just find the shadows of the leaders up ahead on the paved road. They were taking the easiest hike because it was dark. This was the road they had come in on Friday, but since it was a camp road, hardly any cars used it, especially at night. Only if they took a side path could she possibly lose them Brytte knew, and so to keep their shadows ahead and the voices was enough. She wanted to catch up, though, just to be safe, only Carol, puffing beside her, would not walk faster. All that fat must be her trouble, thought Brytte, bitterly. Suddenly aware that she could hear the voices, but could not see the group at all, Brytte ran ahead of Carol to find them.

"Hey, wait up!" she had called, but no one had heard, she guessed, because there was no reply. But there were several paths ahead, and

they had to have taken one of them. She went on to find which one, but heard Carol call from back down the road,

"Brytte, please wait! I'm lost and scared. I can't see you." And Brytte had reluctantly run back to her, tugging her arm to hurry.

"Look, Carol, if you don't come, I'll never find the path they took." But still, Carol did not hurry enough and by the time they reached the first by-path that Brytte thought they might have taken, she could no longer tell, hearing no noise of them or echoes. "We're lost," she had almost wailed, but it came out flatly, stale. So they had stood awkwardly for some minutes.

"I'm sorry, Brytte," she heard Carol whimper beside her. Oh, well, if they were lost, they were, and the best thing to do would be to find some landmark she remembered. It wouldn't do any good to yell at Carol now and get her more upset, even if it was her stupid fault.

"Oh, that's all right, Carol. I guess you couldn't help it if you got a rock in your shoe and all. C'mon, let's see if we can find that little store we passed coming in yesterday." She started up the road again, knowing this time that Carol would follow her quickly enough. That little grocery store on the corner had been open last evening when they had come in to set up camp, so surely it would be open on Saturday night and they could go in, have a coke, and get directions back to the camp. All she had to do was ask the man where camp site # 11 was and they'd be okay again. They saw the store light glowing onto the road about fifteen feet away and Brytte felt relieved to see it. She was really afraid of the dark and the blocks

of woods massed on either side of them, but was even more afraid to show her fear because she could feel Carol shivering beside her and didn't want to make her any more upset. That would be too much to handle besides being lost. *straight road, scared her. Suppose there*

The store was on the left; the strong yellow light came from over the gas pump in front of the store, but the building itself was dark. Now what were they supposed to do, she wondered. They stood at the opening of the road looking left and right down the deserted highway - or maybe not a highway, but a road bigger than the one they had been walking on. "The best thing to do, I think," she turned to Carol, "is to wait right here in the light where they'll be able to find us, or else a car going by will stop and help us." Carol nodded, acquiescently. They sat on a large flat rock placed in front of the store - the same one, Brytte reflected, on which three girls of the troop had sat yesterday drinking soda. There was bound to be a car by here soon and then they could get a lift down the road to a camp site where they'd get the right directions. The crickets were chirping at her in harsh tones for invading their privacy; she should have never, never chosen Carol for her partner. Somebody else should be lost here, not her. She was stupid, stupid to have ever felt sorry for Carol who didn't deserve it, who always kept on acting prissy and selfish even when she was called down for it.

"Brytte, listen, I'm tired of just sitting here all night. Can't you do something?" whined the girl beside her, shifting her weight to cover three fourths of the rock. Brytte, hunched onto the edge of the rock, glared at her and said emphatically, "No." She heard the

car coming from the distance before Carol shook her arm, almost knocking her off balance, "It's a car, Brytte! We're saved!" But the roar of its coming, even so far away that she could see no glimpse of headlights at all down the straight road, scared her. Suppose these people weren't friendly, then what? What could they do if once in the car whoever it was wouldn't take them to camp? All those newspaper stories scared her; she could tell by the engine it must not be a friendly car. Grabbing Carol, she whispered, as if they might hear so far away,

"Run, Carol. We've got to hide in those bushes." And without waiting for her, Brytte ran towards the bushes and sank into the weeds and grass bugs. Carol heaved herself into the thick brush beside, screaming lightly with a panic Brytte felt, digging herself into the wet grass. "Shh!" she cautioned, as the car's roar came closer, now mixed with the blast of a too-loud radio playing static rock and roll. The headlights flashed in front of them not two feet away and brakes screeched the tires on the asphalt driveway. They heard the mumbled low voices of men, then the motor roar up again, the rubber screeching, and then the car was only two red dots down the highway. On the pavement was a cigarette butt still glowing. With the two girls out of the grass now, the crickets resumed the chirping. Brytte had not noticed their even stopping. Brytte stamped the cigarette until the flame died under her sneaker toe. Now she was frightened and made no pretense of hiding the fear from Carol. They must have been sitting here over forty-five minutes and only one car had come by, and it a danger. How much longer would

it have to be before Squirrel found her? He must be searching everywhere but here where she was. All fourteen of them - plus the counselors - out looking off in the woods and not finding them right here in the light. talk to Squirrel and now he is out looking every-

"Brytte, are you scared?" Carol asked, brushing drops of water from her new jeans which would not soak up the dew. Brytte nodded. There was no sense in trying to cover it up any longer. For a partner

"We'd better not stay here. We'd better try to find our way back," she said. Carol behind. But she said nothing aloud.

"All right," Carol agreed, almost too quickly. "Let's start back down this road and take the very first path to the left we come to." That was the best thing, Brytte knew, because their camp was on the left someplace, and they were bound to run into it or another site. Maybe she should have depended more on Carol before. They walked slowly, squinting against the thick darkness to see a path on the left, walking so close to the edge of the road that Brytte almost fell in the ditch. She had thought it would be awful to come out of the light, but now she felt safer, enclosed from the spotlight. Now that she was not so exposed, she could think and act. It was Carol who found the path, although Brytte could still see nothing but a mass of trees spaced with black until she followed Carol's index finger pointing and saw straight ahead of it and far off, a dim, steady light from out of the woods. They stepped across the ditch and could see more clearly the definite space around them, wide enough for two abreast and softly firm with wear under their feet. They walked quickly; the path was even, straight towards the light. This

is what we should have done at first, thought Brytte, this is so easy. If only I hadn't been so confused and so mad with Carol, we could have been back long ago. But it is Carol's fault; she wanted us to get lost so I couldn't talk to Squirrel and now he is out looking everywhere for me, not finding me. She'd never realized how selfish Carol could be, but when she got back to the camp, Carol would never have another chance. Let her see if anyone ever chooses her for a partner again. Next time she certainly wouldn't feel bad about walking with Squirrel and leaving Carol behind. But she said nothing aloud, letting her resentment build as they came closer to the light. They kept a steady silence - except for Carol's heavy breathing - intent on reaching the camp quickly. They slowed as the woods opened onto the light. ~~We're lost. We were hiking with our troop and we got lost back~~

It was not their camp; they'd never seen these people. The clearing was half as large as theirs, with only one tent set in the opening. The light they had seen came from a large kerosene lantern hung on a pole next to the tent. About two feet further a green lounge chair - the kind her mother had set up in the back patio - swayed on its aluminum legs with the weight of a man and woman wrestling in it. The woman's voice turned from a giggle to a laugh at something the man whispered to her. Brytte, astounded, turned to Carol, who was biting her lip nervously. This was not at all what Brytte had expected. But they couldn't turn back and end up where they had been. They had found some people anyhow, and probably Mrs. Dynam or one of the leaders, or Squirrel even, had already been through here asking about them and so they would know

about her and Carol and how to take them back to the right camp.

"Well, c'mon!" she whispered to Carol impatiently, as if it had been Carol stalling the encounter, and walked into the camp scuffing dead leaves and clearing her throat. "Excuse me," Brytte offered timidly to the two bodies now relaxed, crowded into the seat, watching tree tops, Brytte guessed, since their heads were not tilted enough to see the sky.

"Hey, what?" the woman almost jumped out of her seat, except that she could not move very well on one half of the chaise lounge. The man, apparently unalarmed as if he had expected to be interrupted in his reverie just then, regarded the girl at the far end of his lounge and nodded.

"We're lost. We were hiking with our troop and we got lost back on that road and we'd like to find camp site 'll," Brytte explained nervously. The man nodded again, then yelled, "Hey, Bernie!" into the tent flap, and stared at the two girls beyond his toes again.

"I sure can't help you. I don't know a thing about this place. But Bernie, he's camped here lots of times and maybe he knows."

"Thank you," Brytte whispered, but the man had turned his attention to the woman, was whispering something in her ear again that made her giggle. Brytte stared at them, bewildered. She felt like an intruder, yet could not move at all. The man's hair was too long, and greasy looking. His flannel shirt was streaked with charcoal smudges. The woman had long, unevenly cut hair, short and flattened into spit curls around her forehead, tapered into a mass of brown against the back of the chair. She was buxom; her blouse

stretched tightly across her bosom, and the button most strained had popped undone. Brytte wondered if she ought to tell her, but she did not. It made her self-conscious to see it, aware of her own loose sweatshirt which hid most of her 32 AA figure. She was glad now that Squirrel wasn't here to compare. Carol shifted uneasily beside her, staring at her wet sneakers. "Hey, Bernie!" the man yelled again, and this time receiving a mumbled, reluctant "Yeh, what do you want?" by way of reply. "Some kids out here lost. Can you help them?" There was a rustle of clothing inside the tent, and Brytte held her breath as Bernie appeared. He was a much older man - maybe forty, she guessed, about her father's age - than the man in the chaise lounge. His face was peppered with whisker stubble. He looked at them and smiled.

"You lost, huh?" he said gently. Brytte swallowed and nodded, repeating what she had told the other man. "Oh, they're with that troop down the road, Paul, you know. The one we saw pass by here yesterday." He turned to the other man, who nodded "Yeh." "I don't know quite where ^{it}ll is, but it's down this road a ways for sure." Bernie motioned beyond their tent to a dirt road. Brytte nodded; it did not look familiar, but nothing did at this angle. Carol started walking towards it. "Wait, and I'll drive you. It's about a mile down there before another site. You coming, Paul?" Paul shook his head. Brytte breathed more easily. She didn't like Paul, and with just Bernie, it couldn't be dangerous to ride with him. Besides, there were two of them and one of him, and every one was looking for them so if they screamed, someone would hear. Bernie started his

jeep and drove it onto the dirt road, motioning them in. Brytte scrambled in first, Carol sat by the window. He smelled like stale sweat, as if he had not bathed for a month. But he was much nicer than his friend. And he was taking them back to camp finally, so they wouldn't be lost, and now they could have the campfire and she could sit next to Squirrel without Carol around.

"Didn't anyone come tell you we were lost?" Carol asked above the roar of the jeep.

"No," Bernie answered, "Of course, they might not have come that way by us. But it seems strange. How long you been lost?"

"About two hours," Carol said. "Isn't that right, Brytte?" Brytte nodded, but feeling that it must have been a much longer time than that, that Squirrel had probably by now recircled the hike and was very worried.

"Oh, well, two hours isn't long. Some people get lost for days, but not around here. It's easy to find your way around here." Brytte, indignant, wanted to tell him that was not so at all, that they had been very frightened and it had been hard to even get to his camp, that probably even the police were searching for them by now. But she saw the camp lights ahead and was no longer insulted, seeing the leader's tents and knowing that he had brought them to safety.

"We're here!" she breathed excited, shaking Carol's arm.

"I thought this was the right one," Bernie said. He stopped ten feet from the entrance, refusing to get out to meet the leaders. He was gone almost before they had turned away, not even hearing half their thank you's or seeing their enthusiastic waves. Now they were

back and would get fussed over a little and everyone would be glad. They walked the rest of the road into the clearing just as Mrs. Lynam came out of the first tent, car keys in her hand. "Oh, here you are," she said, unconcerned. "I was just about to go looking for you."

"You mean," Carol's mouth dropped a moment, "that you haven't even missed us?"

"Ann just came over and told us that apparently you had lagged behind, because you hadn't come back yet, so I was about to take the car and go look."

"But we've been lost for over two hours," Brytte whispered, disillusioned. "We've been wandering around -"

"But, Brytte," Mrs. Lynam smiled, "that couldn't be; we've been back only half an hour, if that." Hearing singing, Brytte turned and saw the campfire beyond them. They hadn't missed her at all. No one was searching; they were all having a campfire without her while she was out there lost. And if it hadn't been for Bernie, they'd still be lost and no one would have noticed. She started towards them, not sure of what she ought to do now, except find Squirrel and explain to him the mix-up, that it was Carol's fault. But she had not gone two steps before she saw him next to Ann, his back to her in the circle, his hand holding Ann's behind the others, behind his back, right in front of Brytte. Behind her Carol was explaining to Mrs. Lynam about being lost. Brytte gave a little cry of dismay and ran, kicking a stone as she passed the fire, although accidentally, and stumbling, but not stopping even when someone yelled, "Hey, Brytte, we've been wondering

where you were." She ran into the girls' tent and stood for a full minute catching her breath. The campfire light flickered shadows onto the tent walls as she dragged her sleeping bag to the very back of the tent, away from everyone else's. She sat huddled on it listening to the singing. They hadn't even missed her. She could have been carried off in a car a hundred miles by now, kidnapped, or she could have broken her leg falling into a ditch, or gotten lost in the woods forever, but they didn't care and hadn't even missed her at all. Why, they were worse than that Paul. At least he didn't know her and didn't care. And even he had gotten Bernie to help them. If they hadn't missed Carol, she could understand, but for them not to miss her she couldn't believe. And when she had made the whole hike possible by being Carol's partner so everyone would have a buddy. They had just forgotten her, and Squirrel had too. He wasn't out looking for her at all. He was holding Ann's hand, not even worrying about her at all.

"Brytte," she heard Carol call softly from the tent door.

"I'm over here," she answered listlessly. Carol padded over to her, stepping on sleeping bags as she came. She sat down beside her.

"They told me to ask you to come out and sing with them," she said.

"Would you go?" Brytte flung out angrily, startling Carol.

"Well, no," she answered softly, then haughtily, "Besides, they didn't ask me."

"Oh." Brytte looked at Carol curiously. "Well, let's play checkers. I'm not going either." Pleased, Carol began to set up the board. Brytte stared towards the door of the tent, listening.

"It's your move first, Brytte," Carol whispered timidly.

beside her - TEN O'CLOCK IS A GOOD TIME FOR BUSES seats. He had

proceeded to explain to her (unasked) that he organized children's baseball leagues in different cities which somehow or other involved the bodies of sweating, pushing people impatiently awaiting the bus talking to prominent business men for donations. Elizabeth had not for Philadelphia. Elizabeth had purposely chosen to take the 10 o'clock bus figuring that it would be almost empty; she had not expected the bus station to be so busy now. It seemed to her that all these people were jammed onto the platform as if there were no place else in life for them to be. She sighed, knowing now that she had no chance of a seat to herself. She had been planning on choosing her seat at the back of the bus - all the people who are inclined to talk on bus trips sit in the front - and, without having anyone to sit with her, she was going to curl up on the two seats as soon as the bus left Raleigh, pull her trench coat over herself - buses were always cold at night - and sleep until Washington, when she could sit up and watch the city passing by with its wide, empty streets. And after Washington, if not too many people got on the bus at three in the morning, she could curl up again to the sloshing of the commode and be in Philadelphia at seven a.m. without having had to endure the anguish of a sick, rocking day sitting on the bus. Nights always passed so much more quickly and were so much less crowded with people. Except tonight, for some reason, everybody seemed to be going to Washington, along with her. Maybe 10 o'clock was a good time for buses.

Last June when she had gone home for a week, she had taken the 7 o'clock bus. Then too she had thought herself safely established without company when some man on his way to Germantown had sat down

beside her - there had been plenty of other vacant seats. He had proceeded to explain to her (unasked) that he organized children's baseball leagues in different cities which somehow or other involved talking to prominent business men for donations. Elizabeth had not ever quite figured out if he had told her this to impress her with the contacts he had made or because he really did work at this and was himself impressed with his importance. That would have been enough if he hadn't then proceeded to explain to her (unasked) about his family situation. Naturally, he and his wife weren't making it; he had known her only a month before they were married and he'd get a divorce except for his little boy Bobby whom he dearly loved and didn't want to hurt. Once he'd tried to take Bobby and leave his wife, but she had the police arrest him and took back Bobby, for which he would never forgive her and was living with her now, but only in a physical sort of way, if Elizabeth knew what he meant, for the child's sake. By the way, would Elizabeth like a ride home because after they reached Philadelphia it would be no trouble to drop her off since Germantown couldn't be that far from where she lived in Philadelphia, could it? So Elizabeth had said, no, thank you, her parents would be meeting her. After which he had gone to sleep so soundly that he relaxed onto Elizabeth's shoulder at which time Elizabeth woke him up so that she could get out and go to the bathroom. She had moved up the aisle - nearer the bus driver - and had sat down next to a Wave who proceeded to tell her the fabulous possibilities of navy life for a young girl. But that had been the 7 o'clock bus and she had deliberately waited until ten to avoid that

situation again. ~~and seats. Maybe, thought Elizabeth, it's that on~~

Jostled out of her reminiscence of past bus trips, she turned slightly so that she could see the lady who was jabbing her elbow into Elizabeth's back. Elizabeth wanted to assure the lady that the bus - already fifteen minutes late, as buses usually were - would not come any sooner even if she did succeed in pushing Elizabeth and the four people in front of her off the platform entirely. Exasperated, she decided that instead of doing that, she would simply move to where she wouldn't be jabbed anymore. Which meant, of course, leaving her place in line entirely. So she picked up her suitcase defiantly, ~~three~~ glaring at the lady's elbow, and stepped out of line. The people surged forward an inch, but nobody noticed Elizabeth who marched herself from platform seven to platform nine, which happened to be relatively empty if one didn't count the baggage carts and baggage men. She slammed down her green suitcase and slammed herself on top of it, relaxing and pretending that those people didn't happen to exist at all. Breathing seemed a lot easier now, and much less restrained. She opened her eyes in time to see the lady now jostling the fourth person in line, apparently unaware that Elizabeth had left. Elizabeth was not at all sorry for having lost her good place in line. If she couldn't sit alone, anyhow, what difference did it make in which seat she spent the rest of the night - as long as she didn't have to ward ^{off} any more shoulder-sleepers. She studied the line of people to determine if any of them looked safely unassuming, but she couldn't tell right now - people looked non-committal when waiting for buses, but somehow they changed personalities when they

boarded and found seats. Maybe, thought Elizabeth, it's that on buses people feel unrestricted because what they say or do doesn't matter so much; they can get off at their station and they never have to face the same person again - like all the barriers are let down for a few hours. But Elizabeth had never felt that way so much as restricted in the presence of strangers. She liked people if she could study them from a distance, and she thought bus-people were fascinating if she didn't have to sit right next to them and get involved. But she always did get involved.

"Excuse me, ma'am. Excuse me. Ma'am!" The porter called three times before Elizabeth heard him. She looked around to see him standing there, awkward and annoyed at having to yell at her, at her being in the way where she shouldn't be. Elizabeth knew; she didn't like people in her way where they shouldn't be, and she was embarrassed for having caused him trouble. She moved quickly, dragging her suitcase out of his way. (Once, when she had been little, her mother had taken her to the bus station to see her Grandma come in. A porter pushing a loaded baggage cart had been heading right towards her and Elizabeth had not known what to do; she had stood there screaming for her mother while the cart had kept coming faster than it probably was really coming, but it had seemed fast. She would have been plowed down except that her mother grabbed at her. The man stopped the cart when he had seen her mother, but he had not seen Elizabeth before because his cart was so full of luggage. Elizabeth had dreamed about being run over by all those suitcases for nights; now she would never check her suitcase if it was small enough

to carry because she had a superstition that her suitcase just might
Elizabeth.

be the one that would blind the porter and knock down some little
girl. At any rate, that was what she had believed until she was

like barbecued spareribs - overdone.
about fifteen, and from force of habit or because somewhere inside

of her she still did believe it, she would not check her bag. She

definitely had a fear of men driving baggage carts.) He passed by,

almost side-swiping her suitcase, and broke through the line on

platform seven, pulling the cart to a stop at the edge of the

platform. Then the bus must be coming, Elizabeth thought, and moved

back to seven. As she walked to the end of the line, the bus pulled

in, marked "Washington Express" and empty. Maybe, she hoped, if it's

empty now, I can have a seat to myself. But when she had finally

given her ticket to the bus driver and boarded, there were only

two seats left. The one on the left was next to a sinister-

looking Negro man with a band-aid on his cheek, and the other was

next to a massive Negro lady eating potato chips. Elizabeth chose

this right hand seat, twelve rows up, and asked the old lady if she

could sit there. The lady nodded and smiled, still chewing.

Elizabeth hefted her suitcase onto the overhead rack, and sat down

on what was left of the seat beyond the bulk of the old lady.

The lady breathed heavily, rustling the paper sack on her lap

with every intake of breath. Her thick ankles hung over the foot rest

and Elizabeth could see where her stockings were rolled to right below

her knees.

"Girl," she said, "you want some potato chips?" her question ^{was} more

of a command than an offer, as she thrust the potato chips at

Elizabeth. Elizabeth looked over her stomach, crushing her paper bag beneath

then, Elizabeth pushed back her seat so that she could try to sleep. Elizabeth.

"Thank you," Elizabeth smiled weakly. The potato chips tasted like barbecued spareribs - overdone.

"My name is Ida," stated the old lady.

"My name is Elizabeth - Elizabeth Marsel."

"My name is Ida," the old lady repeated, nodding, "just Ida."

"How do you do?" Elizabeth replied embarrassed and wondering what else she could say or was expected to say. Ida grinned two teeth and black gaps of a smile.

"I do fine, just fine."

Elizabeth smiled back at her and said, "I'm pleased to meet you." The bus lurched as the motor started and the luggage door slammed shut. As they pulled out of the station, Ida fished in her paper bag. Her hand was lost in its rustling fullness for a minute and then slowly pulled out a small apple. Ida, still smiling, reminded Elizabeth of a magician who had not really expected the bunny to come out of his hat, but was pleased when it did. Ida handed her the apple silently. "Oh, no thank you, I'm still eating the potato chips," she protested. But Ida did not withdraw her hand; as if she had not heard, she kept offering the apple. "Well, thank you." So she accepted it, putting it in her lap. Ida grunted satisfaction and leaned back in her seat. Elizabeth would have looked out the window until Raleigh was long gone and there were no more lights, but she had to be sitting next to the aisle. She ate the potato chips which were salty and reddish-colored from the barbecue. Ida was snoring now, her arms flapped loosely over her stomach, crushing her paper bag beneath

them. Elizabeth pushed back her seat so that she could try to sleep. But she couldn't; there was too much of the old Negro to allow Elizabeth any movement, and she couldn't be comfortable. She sat up, intending to read, but the lights would not work. She wished she'd waited for the 12 o'clock bus. That one just couldn't have been so crowded as this one, but, then, that's what she had thought about the 10 o'clock. It almost couldn't be this boring in the daytime riding the bus. Then, even if she were sitting on the aisle, she could catch glimpses of scenery or read. (She remembered having come back on the bus by way of the West Virginia mountains one Christmas. She had been sitting on the inside seat peering out into the fog and sleet as the driver urged the bus up the mountain side. Twice she had thought they would slip off the side of the narrow road down into the valley miles below. There were no walls to stop the fall, only narrow, curving roads going up forever, never down. Once when she had looked down, the fog cleared enough so that she could see the houses in the valley like a Brigadoon down there, but no way to get to it but to jump. It would have been a fascinating view if she had not been so afraid that the driver would decide to jump down there, taking all of them with them - accidentally or not.) If bus travel weren't so cheap, I'd always take the plane, she declared silently as a kind of inward resolution, but knowing even as she said it that she would forget the boredom of the trip within an hour after being home, and choose to take the bus back again. Buses had so much more character; they forced a kind of intimacy that Elizabeth needed even though she vowed that she hated it. Even the shoulder-sleeper had taught her something, if nothing but to feel sorry for little boys

who get abducted by their fathers and rescued by the police. And she would not have seen that Brigadoon valley in West Virginia or have the picture of it now, or know the advantages of navy life had she not taken the bus. Even Ida was kind of interesting - warm, in her own way. It was just about now, she was thinking, that he leaned over onto me and I woke him up to let me out - the bus swerved to the side of the road, and stopped with a lurch which jolted Elizabeth and awoke Ida in the middle of a deep snore.

Ida sat up with a snort. "Hey, what's happening?" somebody called from the back of the bus.

"We always got some trouble," Ida muttered, coming awake. The driver jumped down from the bus in two steps and disappeared into the dark where Elizabeth could not see him anymore.

"He's talking to someone out there," came an explanation from the right hand side of the bus.

"Hey, girl - Elizabeth, did you say-" Ida was again fishing in her paper bag, "I got somethin' to show you here." Elizabeth turned to her politely, and saw Ida pull out a small magazine. She put it on her knees, smoothed it, and handed it to Elizabeth. "You look at it, hear?" She grinned with pride for her gift. Elizabeth looked. It was a Seventh Day Adventist catalogue, with two Negro nurses smiling at her over the body of a bandaged patient. Once Elizabeth had met a Mormon who had tried to warn her that the End was soon to come, but she was still not used to handling impromptu evangelism. So she smiled unfelt gratitude and opened the magazine, feeling obligated to give it due respect. She had not yet finished the first page on

missionaries when a highway patrolman boarded the bus. Instantly the passengers became alert; the murmurs stopped. "Just a routine check," he assured them coolly, but Elizabeth knew he was lying; patrolmen had never checked buses she'd been on before. He walked towards the back of the bus slowly, checking every face as he went as if he were mentally punching tickets to make sure everyone who was here had a right to be. In the back he stopped, looking at the backs of heads he had just passed, then walked down the aisle briskly, calling, "Okay, driver!" as he hopped off the bus. The driver walked up the steps, swung into his chair, and started the bus with no comments about the delay. As the bus moved onto the highway again, the voices of irate passengers buzzed around Elizabeth. Elizabeth herself was curious, but felt no indignation. If the patrolman had to stop the bus, he had to.

"You like the book?" Ida was asking her.

"Yes. It's very interesting, but I'm not finished reading it."

"Take your time. That's alright." The old woman nodded, leaning over to look at the pages with Elizabeth. She could smell the barbecue on the old lady's breath as she watched the children playing in streets and doctors treating elephantiasis. It took her only ten minutes to finish the pamphlet because she didn't read the explanations - she thought perhaps Ida would not know how to read, thus would be just as bored waiting for her to finish as she would be reading it.

She was wondering what she could say about the magazine that would keep off of racial topics or religion when the bus pulled to

the side of the road again. The doors swung open and a voice yelled in, "Has anybody stopped you yet?"

"Yeh," nodded the driver, not getting out this time, "about twenty miles back."

"Well," said the patrolman, boarding, "I guess I'll have to check you anyhow." He walked down the aisle, searching with the same scrutiny as the last patrolman. Another patrolman stood at the front of the bus as if to stop anyone who might want to escape. The first man stopped in front of Elizabeth's seat. He turned his back to her and questioned the Negro man across the aisle. Elizabeth breathed harder and strained to catch his words, but she needn't have; the patrolman was rudely loud. "You, buddy. Where were you this afternoon?"

The Negro answered insolently, "I been on this bus all day from Miami. I ain't done nothin to you, mister."

"Where'd you get that cut?" the patrolman asked, disregarding the man's answer.

"Cut myself shavin. What's it to you?"

"Alright, buddy. Come on, let's get off the bus; we want to ask you a few questions." He stepped back to let the Negro rise, and followed him down the aisle. The driver whistled slowly and shook his head when the lady in front tapped him and asked for an explanation.

"Just checkin, I guess, lady," he replied, shrugging his shoulders. Outside, the voices rose angrily, then lowered, and the Negro boarded again, walking sullenly back to his seat. Elizabeth noticed the angry set of his face and wondered what he'd done - or

what they thought he had done. The patrolman came down the aisle again, passed the Negro, and tapped another Negro two seats beyond him on the shoulder.

"Would you mind stepping outside for a few questions?" he was more courteous now.

"I don't know what they wanted," the Negro threw out to the silent, attentive passengers. "They asked me more questions about where I been, and let me come back. I told him he was crazy if I was comin' back here without him pulling somebody else off this bus, too. I don't want anybody to think I'm the only one. I ain't done nothin they thought I did." The other Negro was back in only a minute.

"Hey, can I go?" called the bus driver out the door. A muffled voice replied, and the driver disappeared again. He returned, closing the bus doors, and stood in the aisle by his seat, cap in hand. Everyone quieted to hear him. "They got road blocks all along here in the state. But we won't be stopped anymore, I think. What it is, they wanted me to tell you, is that some man robbed a bank in Raeford county this afternoon. Took quite a bit of money and shot the teller. Teller's unconscious, but a witness said it was a Negro man with a cut on his face, so they're trying to find him. They're checking buses because they found what they think is his car near a bus station in Raeford." Finished, he put on his cap and sat down. There was a silence as he started the motor and pulled the bus onto the road.

"What I want to know is," the Negro man across the aisle shouted angrily, "why the hell it always has to be some nigger that gets blamed. Some white man could have done it just as well. Why would a Negro want to rob some bank in Raeford, huh?" Elizabeth cringed, wondering if he might lunge out of his seat and hit someone, he was that angry. Ida stared at him in fear, her black hands clenched so hard they went whitish around the creases. No one turned to look at him; all eyes faced straight ahead in the tenseness. No one spoke, feeling somehow to blame for his humiliation. His voice split the tension once more. "Just you let me know when this bus gets across the state line, mister bus driver. I want to know when." Ida burst into almost hysterical laughter. Her voice filled the bus, booming and breaking the tension. Others laughed, easier now, relaxed. Everyone smiled. Elizabeth had read about mob feeling before; she knew about the Chicago riot. But this was the first time she had experienced unified group reaction.

"I'll do that buddy!" the driver shouted back through the bus. "As a matter of fact, I'd be glad to do that!"

It was strange about people's reactions. (Once, when she had been taking turns on the swing with her brother, he had cheated her out of a ride. She remembered having felt humiliated and so frustrated that she had gotten really angry. She had grabbed the nearest rock and hurled it at him with a force which had surprised her. She had missed, of course, but when she had heard the thud, she had started to cry. She had cried for half an hour, not because she had or hadn't hit him; that she might have done so didn't bother her so much as that

she had been so violent, and when she threw the rock she had freed herself from the violence and was ashamed of herself.) This time the Negro had had to throw his rock at them, and Elizabeth knew they deserved it; they'd accused him. She wondered what would have happened if Ida had not dodged the rock for them and made them laugh. She wanted to ask the old lady - what could she ask her? Why she had laughed? No. The closeness she had felt to Ida for that one moment - that everyone had felt - was a moment gone, and Ida knew nothing about the rock Elizabeth had thrown. She picked up the magazine from and handed it back to Ida.

"Thank you," she said.

"If you liked it, you keep it, girl," said Ida nodding satisfaction. "You keep it." Elizabeth dropped the pamphlet back into her lap and Ida reached for it. Elizabeth, puzzled, picked it up quickly and handed it to her, not understanding the contradiction. "No," Ida shook her head. She took the magazine and turned it over, pointing to a coupon to be torn out on the dotted lines. "You want to give a donation?" she asked.

"Why, yes, of course," Elizabeth stammered, not knowing what else to do; she had not expected to be asked and hated giving "donations" to unknown causes, yet she felt that she owed Ida something. "But I haven't much money with me." She wondered if she was to send it to this address or give it to Ida. Ida reached for her purse under the seat. Elizabeth pulled out her wallet and looked. She had the return ticket and fifty cents in change. There was a dollar in the bill section. She handed it to Ida. "I haven't

any more right now," she apologized. "Ida crumpled the bill and dropped it into her purse. ~~to cart and could not sleep the last hour before~~

"Thank you, child. This is just fine; we ain't too proud to take it. Now, if you have more later, you just send it on in. Lord knows we can wait for it." Elizabeth took back the pamphlet Ida was holding out to her. She leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes. I don't suppose that that dollar will ever get to the Adventists, she mused. She didn't know if she was disillusioned or not; but that didn't really matter any more than the fact that Ida wouldn't have understood about the rock. If she owed something to Ida, this was probably the only way to pay her.

She woke up when they were crossing the Potomac; she hadn't heard if the driver had said when they left North Carolina. Ida was snoring again. Elizabeth did not wake her until they passed the nightclub lights, and she knew the bus station was near. She watched Ida gather up her purse and paper bag, she pulled down her duffle bag for her from the rack, and stepped back to let the fat old woman pass. No one recognized her as she waddled down the aisle. Somehow Elizabeth had thought they would. She moved her luggage to the back of the almost empty bus and sat waiting until they pulled out. She couldn't afford a cup of coffee now because she would have to take the suburban train out from Philadelphia when the bus arrived, and as it was she lacked twenty cents of the fare. But it would be right before the rush of commuter traffic, and conductors were nice people when there wasn't any rush. She curled up on the two seats right before the commode and used the Seventh Day Adventists'

catalogue for her pillow. She woke up from dreaming of being run

over by the baggage cart and could not sleep the last hour before

Meredith Elsten received her dismissal from The Order of the Philadelphia. The commode door banged, but she could not lock it tight for Sids on Thursday, the day before Christmas vacation of her sophomore year of college. She opened her mail box and saw it someone else would have shut it, but no one did. She felt lonely. She went back behind the notice of payment due from Columbia Record. No one was talking.

Club and a letter from Joan. She pulled it out and examined it with

curiosity she didn't feel for the Columbia envelope, nor for Joan's

letter, since she recognized Joan's handwriting immediately. The

letter was addressed to Meredith Elsten in neat, blue, ball point
Lowson College
Lowson, Pa.

letters. A neat red X had been drawn through the middle of the

address, and a scribble of red haste in the left hand corner offered

another address: forward to Meredith Elsten And through the
607 East End Rd.
Lowella, Pa.

forwarding address a single black pencil line was drawn diagonally

up to an arrow point, above which was the message: try P.O. Box #211
Shepherd College
Wilson, Pa.

The Lowella postman must have written that last message, Meredith

figured, smiling at the irony conveyed by the "try." And the red X

and scribble in the left hand corner were probably Scooter's doing

because Scooter worked in the college post office at Lowson College

and would have remembered Meredith's home address since she and

Scooter had been sisters in D.O.

(Everyone who was belonged to a sorority at Lowson unless she happened to be a day student - there wasn't anything else to do there

THE DEMISSION

Meredith Blaten received her demission from The Order of the Rainbow for Girls on Thursday, the day before Christmas vacation of her sophomore year of college. She opened her mail box and saw it stuck way back behind the notice of payment due from Columbia Record Club and a letter from Joan. She pulled it out and examined it with a curiosity she didn't feel for the Columbia envelope, nor for Joan's letter, since she recognized Joan's handwriting immediately. The letter was addressed to Meredith Blaten in neat, blue, ball point Lowson College Lowson, Pa.

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The Louella postman must have written that last message, Meredith figured, smiling at the irony conveyed by the "try." And the red X and scribble in the left hand corner were probably Scooter's doing because Scooter worked in the college post office at Lowson College and would have remembered Meredith's home address since she and Scooter had been sisters in D.G.

(Everyone who was belonged to a sorority at Lowson unless she happened to be a day student - there wasn't anything else to do there

without belonging to a sorority, including studying. Now that she had transferred, she didn't miss it - it was nice to have spending money again instead of dues to pay. Only of course, since Scooter wasn't her sister anymore, she wouldn't have known that Mr. Blaten had moved his family to Syracuse. "Talk about severed ties," Meredith muttered, almost but not quite, regretting her transfer. She hated being forgotten and knew she was most certainly being forgotten now at Lowson. When she had visited there one afternoon driving through New Jersey to the shore for a weekend, she had realized then that any of herself left at Lowson was dwindling fast away from their life. They had been so happy to see her, but were busy all the same in Lowson ways which did not include her. She thought she had explained to Scooter that her family had moved, but perhaps there hadn't been time, or maybe it was just that Scooter hadn't been listening too closely. At any rate, here was the letter forwarded to the last year's home address, postmarked Lowson, then Louella.)

"It doesn't matter now," she decided, and returned to her scrutiny of the envelope - she wanted to guess the letter before she really opened it. The original postmark was Berwyn, Pa., Nov. 25; the circles of postmark from Lowson and Louella were stamped one on each side of the Berwyn in emphatic black dates of Dec. 1 and Dec. 10. The flap of the envelope was tucked inside, like a Christmas card would be, unsealed to save the penny. But Meredith knew that it was definitely not a Christmas card - no one she knew now was as much as three postmarks behind in her addresses and what's more, no one she knew lived in Berwyn. Unless it was from someone in Rainbow.

She pulled out the flap and unfolded the single typewritten sheet. A Santa Claus sticker was pasted at the center top of the letter, the date Nov. 24 on the right and Assembly # 92 Order of the Rainbow for Girls Berwyn, Pa.

neatly asserted itself at the left. At first Meredith was disappointed; after all the postmarks, she had hoped for something more exciting. All this would be was another program of meetings and events which she had received twice or three times last year at Lowson, and which she had thought they would stop sending to her since she was too far away to come anyhow. But she read it expectantly anyhow; it was mail. The letter was typed, not mimeographed, and there was no schedule of dates. It was addressed to her personally.

Dear Meredith, You have not paid your dues for last year, 1951, and your dues for this year, 1952, which were due in September. As you have been notified of these outstanding dues twice, according to our records, the treasury committee has recommended that your name be considered and voted upon by the assembly for demission. We will allow you two weeks from the date of this letter to pay your outstanding dues. Your demission, however, must be considered at our next meeting on Dec. 8. Please give this matter immediate and serious attention.

Sincerely,
Sandy Gayle
Worthy Advisor

The signature, Meredith noted, was the same as the writing on the front of the envelope, but she did not know Sandy. She might have been initiated soon after Meredith's senior year of high school and gone through the chairs quickly. Maybe she was a popular young lady.

Meredith frowned, wondering what she ought to do with the letter;

it was obviously a week too late to pay the dues now. Besides, if she had received the demission two weeks ago when she should have, she probably wouldn't have wanted to pay up either, although she probably would have just because - because it was good to still belong anyway. But now it was a bother. She supposed she owed them the courtesy of a reply, but, then, if she didn't reply, they might think greater things of her than just that she had moved. Perhaps they'd wonder if she was dead or in Europe or quit college and was bumming around Alaska. Anyhow, they might wonder a little about her and not feel quite so justified in the righteousness of demitting her. She could see them - all of them sitting around in white dresses at the business meeting, deciding to demit Meredith Blaten, a member in bad standing. She knew; she had been there when the decision to demit Dottie and Peggy Lewis had been made three years ago. The Recorder had stood up and read off their names, declared that the Lewis twins had not paid dues for three years and had not attended meetings for quite some time. She had recommended that a letter of warning be sent to them, and the demission be formally transacted at the next business meeting. Meredith, sitting in the horseshoe of chairs reserved for officers, had turned in her chair of Religion to Shirley on the right in Nature's chair and whispered, "Who are they? I've never heard of the Lewis twins." But that was only

"They graduated from Conestoga High two years ago," Shirley had explained. "Before they got out of high school they used to come all the time, but they haven't any more." Meredith had nodded and turned her attention again to the Recorder, who was saying that she thought

demission would be only fair if Dottie and Peggy were no longer interested; Rainbow needed active members. Meredith had not been able to understand why the twins were no longer interested in Rainbow; she had tried to picture them and concluded that they were not very interesting girls if they could give up Rainbow so easily. She had looked over at the girls visiting the meeting that night, those who were not officers but always came because they enjoyed Rainbow. She knew that if ever she wasn't an officer anymore - after she had been Worthy Advisor, of course, and was home on vacations from college - she would be sitting out there as a visitor too. She had raised her hand in agreement that Dottie and Peggy should be warned of demission. And she had vowed that never would it happen that Rainbow would forget who Meredith Blaten was; her name would never be read by the Recorder from a list of negligent members.

And now they had sent her the warning. She flushed uneasily and shifted weight, still standing by her post office box. It wasn't her fault that she had transferred colleges; she had nothing to do with Dad's changing jobs and moving the family address so that the letter was late getting to her. And she had not received any notice for dues in September, either. She wondered if anyone at Rainbow would remember her while they were voting her demission or if they would simply judge her as they had the Lewis twins. But that was only fair; it was her own fault. Still, they didn't even know her...

When she was 16, reading the introductory pamphlet to Rainbow that Shirley had given her (and Shirley telling her to please not show it to anyone) had been an exciting moment, swelling her into

an importance of being someone, in an exclusive club. She read about the honors of being a Rainbow girl, the privileges and experience it gave. "Oh, they'll have you ride grey elephants all around the floor," Shirley had answered when she asked about initiation, and Meredith had almost believed her. It would be special, she knew, and very secret, since Shirley was teasing her only because she could not say what would really happen. Rainbowbird was very special and secret to her then.

Now, even though she could still know of that first excitement, she could no longer care much. She supposed it was a rather nice experience, but if she could change the past, she'd rather have been a senior girl scout - that was a lot more than just a bunch of secrets. "Well," she said aloud, considering the brown metal wastebasket standing expectantly beside the rows of post office boxes. She shrugged, tossed her head once, and stashed the demission behind the Columbia bill which she would ignore yet awhile longer. She might as well keep them as throw these letters away. The letter from Joan she read walking up the hill to Shepard's North dorm.

"Did we get any mail?" Susanne asked.

"No. Well, you didn't. I got three, one from Columbia and one from Joan."

"You really ought to pay that bill to Columbia, Meredith," Susanne commented as she crossed to the sink to get her towel.

"I don't have any money, for corn's sake, Susanne. I just don't and they'll have to wait and stop sending me crummy notices."

about it."

"If it's only the money, I can lend you -"

"No, thanks, No." Susanne was nice, but they'd been through that money before and Meredith had kept saying no and Susanne had kept on offering every time.

"Well," Susanne wrapped her towel around her arm and balanced the soap on her palm. "That's only two letters. What was the third."

"Nothing. Just from Rainbow- they've demitted me." There, she'd said it, flippantly enough so that when she had to tell her mother it would come easily.

"Rainbow?" Susanne knitted her brows. "Oh. I wouldn't know too much about that."

"Why not?"

"I'm Jewish, for god's sake, Meredith! How many times do I -" Susanne stopped. "I forgot my shower cap," she crossed to her dresser and pulled a blue plastic cap from the bottom drawer. "Why did they demit you?"

"Because I haven't paid my dues for two years."

"Um," said Susanne, but she did not offer to lend any money this time. "Well, I'll be back." She banged the door behind her. Meredith flopped onto her bed. She wondered if she'd hurt Susanne's feelings, only by now, Susanne should be used to Meredith's forgetting she was Jewish all the time.

(Standing in the lunch line with Susanne for the first time, they had seen the platters of corned beef for sandwiches on the brown trays, and the faces wrinkling in distaste as they ate. "Well,

I ought to be happy," Susanne had quipped too lightly to Josy and Meredith. Josy had laughed awkwardly and shrugged, but Meredith had asked why, not getting any joke. Susanne had stared at her a moment in disbelief and then answered quickly, "I'm Jewish, that's why. Jews are supposed to like corned beef; it's kosher. But even some Jews don't like corned beef and neither do I." Stunned, Meredith had said no more until later when she ventured an apology. Susanne had replied in the same tone, "That's okay, some of my best friends are Jews." And then Meredith had said no more at all unless it simply slipped out. (She felt uneasy with Susanne's defensive replies.) Anyhow, she'd never considered that Rainbow wasn't open to Jews. It just hadn't occurred to her. True, when she had just been initiated, she had decided to gain points by bringing in a new member as Shirley had brought her in. She had chosen Katy because Katy would have enjoyed Rainbow. But when she had asked Shirley for a pamphlet to show Katy, Shirley had asked suspiciously,

"Katy? Katy who?"

"Katy Spinelli, of course. Who else?" Meredith had replied, thinking Shirley rather silly for not knowing.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Shirley had stated flatly.

"Well, why not?" Meredith had challenged.

"Because. Because they won't accept her petition, that's why," Shirley had replied. "She's Catholic, isn't she? Italian Catholic. Catholics have their own clubs."

"Oh," Meredith had accepted dubiously. It was a silly rule, and she couldn't remember that Katy belonged to any special clubs,

but maybe Shirley knew. At any rate, she had accepted the answer and let it pass, not remembering or feeling any guilt until now.

over Susanne's shower was running; she could hear the water hit the tile floor hard. "Demitted," Meredith repeated aloud. It was a funny word. Kind of nice and staunch - hard, as a matter of fact, a firm, no questions asked word that made you feel officially almost condemned. Now she knew how Joseph K. of The Trial must have felt when the officer had informed him of his arrest that first morning. She got up and went to the bookshelf. But she could not even find the word "demit" in Webster's New World (Concise). demise, red, but demisemiquaver, demitase. But there had to be such a word; Rainbow always used. She took down Susanne's Seventh New Collegiate and looked again. There it was under demisemiquaver; demission, demit; 1) archaic; demiss. Well, she comforted herself, if I'm going to be dismissed, at least it's by an archaic word.

She felt silly even worrying about the stupid letter, but then, she guessed now that she thought back on it all, re-capturing a little of her hi-school mind, she really had wanted that night of the long white formal and grey elephants. (She had still been of sewing the last of the sequins on her gown. Proudly she had dressed and admired the gown which looked so much alive with its ironed smell of starched net and sequins glittering pinkness and hints of the Rainbow she would soon be a part of. No one could have recognized the gown as the limpness she had discovered on the rack of dresses at the Commission Shop, or known that for only ten dollars she was now about to be initiated formally and specially for

the first time in her life. The white had turned a tiny bit yellow but when she wrapped her mother's mink piece around her shoulders, over the shoulder straps which were as necessary as the whiteness of the gown in Rainbow, the deep brown and tiny mink eyes of the dead animal contrasted with the dress exactly right.

Once there, however, she had had to leave the mink in the closet way. It wouldn't matter, she had figured, hiding the mink behind Shirley's coat as Shirley left to march into the meeting as an officer. Shirley had told her that she was the only one being initiated so the slight yellowness wouldn't have to be compared, but distinct. Only, Meredith reflected now, Shirley had been wrong. There was Barbara sitting in the hall way too, waiting to be initiated. So the grey elephants weren't for her alone after all. She would have to share them. She sat opposite the girl in her white fullness and smiled nervously. "I'm Barbara Holiman," the peau de doie had offered and thus Meredith had been compelled to introduce herself to the destroyer of her grey elephants. "Penney said it'll be half an hour before they'll let us in," Barbara stated, matter-of-factly, as Meredith's eyes followed the last of the long formals marching into the meeting hall - Shirley had entered long ago, at the front of the line someplace. The door closed firmly behind them and Meredith had felt shut out of their purity, no longer hearing the piano accompanying the procession with the Rainbow march song now that the door had shut so firmly. But only for half an hour, as Barbara seemed to know.

"Who is Penney?" she had asked, turning back to Barbara.

"She's Faith, didn't you know? She was just voted in last month and now she'll go through the chairs to Worthy Advisor in the next five terms. Her picture was in the Berwyn papers. Faith leads us all around for Initiation."

"Oh," Meredith wondered how Barbara could know that Faith would be leading them around. Shirley wouldn't tell her anything about it because she said it all had to be very secret. "I don't know anyone except Shirley because I go to Villa High, not Conestoga." Barbara had nodded sympathetically.

"At least you don't have a science quiz tomorrow." And she had opened a chemistry book. Meredith wondered how she could possibly be studying right before the Rainbow Initiation, in the hall to the very meeting room; she would have studied for two days before just so she wouldn't have had to tonight. She could hear the voices inside but not enough to be able to listen for words. She counted the tiles on the opposite wall, breathing in with every other tile she counted, exhaling with the next tile. She sucked in her stomach then let it expand again, but she could not see it move under the net of her dress. Then she fingered the sequins on her midriff until the door from the meeting opened.

"Hello, Penney," Barbara whispered loudly as Penney closed the door and came out.

"Hi. I thought you were going to be late," Penney had said.

Barbara had shrugged, "Might as well study here." Penney turned to Meredith.

"I'm Faith - that's my office," she explained. "And I will

guide you during the Initiation Journey."

There were two knocks from the inside of the door, which Penney-Faith had turned to answer with three of her own. Then the door had opened and Meredith and Barbara followed her inside. "Two girls who have petitioned and now seek acceptance into the Rainbow," Penney-Faith stated formally to the rows of white gowns Meredith saw facing her. And they had begun the walk, one of them on each arm of Penney, around the ballroom. A horseshoe of nine girls, each with a band of color from the Rainbow draped across her shoulder, sitting in grey metal chairs, filled the center of the room. On each side, North, East, South, and West, was a pulpit behind which stood a girl to greet the initiates. Faith had led them one on each arm, to the front of the room, pacing each step and repeating in high, clear tones a speech from Revelations that Meredith had read in Sunday School once along with the passages about the awful beasts and the one thousand marked Christians at the End of the world. She led them to each of the four pulpits, and at each the girl behind the post would rise and repeat to them a speech (if she forgot a part of it, a prompter from the back of the room would begin to repeat the next phrase for her). Meredith had listened as Penney-Faith had counted one, two, three steps under her breath and then began another section of her speech which was perfectly timed to last precisely from block one of the tile floor on the West side to block thirteen on the East side. All was silent; everyone was watching them. She felt their eyes on her sequins and had hoped

she accompanied to the Rainbow song. She had earned her part for

she had finally got the right amount sewn on in the right places. She listened to the words, "And I saw as it were..."

They had sat her down on a row of empty chairs and told her that for the next part of Initiation, only one girl could journey through the chairs, but for her to consider carefully all that was said, and to realize that its significance was being said for her too. She watched as Barbara entered the horseshoe, as each color of the Rainbow stated her particular virtue - Religion, Nature, Patriotism, and attended to each word fervently, wishing it had been Meredith, nor Barbara, who went through. And in the end she had been called again from her lonely chair to receive with Barbara her lampskin apron which Penney-Faith tied to her wrist as the symbol of membership. And everyone had formed a circle and sung "I give my heart and my hand to you, Rainbow, mine..." She and Barbara sat and watched them march from the room into the hall. The spell had broken only when the march had stopped (after the third stanza) and everyone had come milling back into the room noisily, spilling punch in pink drops onto the floor. Meredith had been lost in the girls smiling around her in "Congratulations, we are glad to have you" until Shirley had offered her a cookie and punch. She and Barbara had smiled sisterhood to each other and Barbara had floated away to the chemistry book, Meredith supposed, amidst the too many, too close girls hooped onto the meeting floor.

She had applied for a position in the Rainbow immediately, she had even been musician when they could find no one else to play the piano accompaniment to the Rainbow song. She had earned her bars for

service well. She had wanted fervently to be a good Rainbow girl and to be known and liked there even if she did go to a different high school. In Rainbow she would be remembered.

But two years was too long a time to be remembered when you hadn't even been Worthy Advisor for a term. Not that she hadn't tried to be Worthy Advisor, but that was an elected office and she hadn't been elected to go through the chairs as Penney had been. Meredith had sat there praying, praying that she would make it. Above all else, she wanted to serve as Worthy Advisor, even if she did have to memorize from the Revelations for the next Initiation. She could lead in the petitioners as Penney-Faith had led her in, she could hand out the lambskin aprons and tell what they meant to each Rainbow girl as Charity had done, she could reach the highest point of Rainbow if only they would elect her. Surely they would elect her. But they had not. They had not and Meredith could still not figure out why. The Recorder and her assistant had counted the votes as the meeting proceeded, and Meredith had watched jealously at the piles of paper being neatly stacked - one pile for Meredith, one for the other girl. The Worthy Advisor had droned on and on and Meredith had gotten hotter and more nervous as the piles grew. They had grown evenly, it had seemed to her, and when the Recorder rose to interrupt the Worthy Advisor with the final vote, she had known it was close. But it had not been her; she had missed it by seven votes. Everyone had clapped and looked sympathetically at Meredith.

The meeting had gone on. Her eyes had hurt; she had blinked

until they hurt even more. They blurred and she rubbed them, rubbed the contact out of place and she could not see - the pressure of it not fitting in the corner of her eye frightened her. She had to get it back into place, but she needed a mirror. She had wanted to leave the meeting, to go to the girls' room and get it back right before she might go blind. The girl Religion was staring at her. "Are you all right?" she had asked. "Yes. My contact," Meredith had whispered back. The girl had nodded. "Maybe you ought to leave for a minute and go to the restroom." Meredith had hesitated after rising, not sure whether she was allowed to cross to the left or if, by ritualistic order, she would have to circle around the whole floor to get out of the meeting hall. She crossed, did not circle, and knew she should have when Millie frowned, but opened the door for her anyway. In the bathroom she had searched for a kleenex and contact fluid. At first she couldn't find where the lens was and when she did it was hard to push it back where it belonged. She had thought she must be losing her sight until, looking down, winking to favor the injured eye, she had seen herself clearly in the mirror-topped dresser. The eye was red; that was all. She didn't look awful bad or upset or anything. Then why hadn't they elected her? Was it because she'd sung off-key with the acappella choir competition and maybe lost their chapter the first prize - although Nancy had assured her that it was not Meredith who had been off-key. Or was it that she could only play the Rainbow song with one hand if she didn't want to make mistakes? It couldn't have been that, she knew - Aunt Ellen had thanked her especially for even after the meeting, after "I give my heart and my hand" was sung and

trying. Well, only seven votes. She had stood up and peered at herself in the full-length mirror; the net layers of her formal hung limply and her left eye was a smudge. She had knocked for re-admittance and whispered the password in Millie's ear. Everyone had been staring at her as she sat down, embarrassed. Afterwards she had said to Aunt Ellen, "Oh, I'm okay. It was my contact; I'm just getting used to them and I left them in too long is all.")

Meredith shifted herself, retucking her legs so she stretched onto the whole bed length and smiled bitterly at Sen. Humphrey displayed on the cover of Time beside her. She still held it against them for hurting her, but against them as a group, a symbol, because she had no way of knowing which seven votes had been cast so wrongly. How could one "get even" with a situation like that? Especially when she could figure no specific reason for their rejecting her. She had done all she could by ignoring them, only to have them catch up again and demit her. And if she relented, finally now gave in and sent the dues, what? She could hear them at the next meeting, recommending that Meredith Blaten's demission be withdrawn as her dues were now paid in full through 1952. And hear Religion say to Patriotism, "But who is Meredith Blaten, anyhow. I've never seen her." And have no one even remember, or vaguely a someone sitting on the sidelines that night might remember her knocking for re-admission in her sequin, limp-net dress that night of Faith and say, "I know her; I know who Meredith Blaten is." But it would not be important enough to talk about after the meeting, after "I give my heart and my hand" was sung and

all the long formals had marched out and re-entered chattering, to greet their older member amidst tears and hugs of joy at her presence. The memory would be submerged somewhere drowning in their whiteness, their cookie crumbs of refreshments; none of them would know that she had played the Rainbow song with only her right hand to avoid mistakes.

Four dollars for two years, one past and one coming - going fast. Both with no recollection of Meredith Blaten, only a name on the record, a principle - money for gavels, perhaps, or lambskin aprons. Member in good standing, Meredith Blaten, Member in bad standing, Meredith Blaten. Gone and forgotten.

She got off the bed and crossed to Susanne's dresser for some matches and the glass Susanne had brought back from the infirmary after she had had strep throat. Setting the glass on the window will so as not to smoke up the room, she shaped the Rainbow letter into a cylinder, placed it carefully in the glass and lit a match to the paper. It was still burning quietly when Susanne opened the door.

"Hey, what's burning?" she asked, then saw the glass smoldering flames.

"Rainbow," Meredith replied, feeding the well post-marked envelope into the glass, "I'm incinerating the Order of the Rainbow for Girls."

Susanne smiled uncertainly, bitterly.

Meredith Blaten, member in bad standing. Meredith Blaten, gone and forgotten.

THERE'S ALWAYS A FIRST TIME

William screeched to a stop at the Esso station off the highway. The knuckles of Danny's hand, which grasped the window bar where the wing was open and had been in a nervous pressure for the last hour now, turned white with added pressure. He wished William would not drive so fast, although even the sudden reckless spurts of William's driving, his slamming on of brakes, had never before bothered Danny. He supposed that it must be this time an annoyance because he was not any too anxious, really, to get where they were going. Once there, he would be directly confronted by the horrible uncertainty of what to do when one wasn't sure of the right approach. William was already out of the car directing the attendant to fill it up and check the oil. Danny opened his door slowly. He wasn't sure exactly why they had stopped here, but he had a pretty good idea; this was the last well-equipped gas station on the way to their destination in the West Virginia valley town, and although you never spoke outright about such things, it was time to buy some kind of protection for tonight.

"C'mon, Danny, it's this way!" motioned William, heading away from the car to the right, along the side of the station. Danny hopped out and followed William, seeing him disappear into the blue door marked "Men" as he rounded the corner. He rubbed his damp hands on his pants and went inside. William was standing in front of the machine in the far corner of the small room. If Danny had not known what it was, he'd have accepted it for a comb machine, but he'd known better ever since as a little boy his

father had scolded him for fiddling with a similar machine because he had wanted a comb to tumble out. He reached for a quarter in his pocket as William inserted his and pulled the lever. A packet dropped quietly from 666 into the catch-base and William deposited it in his shirt pocket. Danny had used the machine several times before, but more for prestige or ego purposes to impress a friend with him at the time than for any real purpose. (Once he'd carried the packet in his wallet for two months before his mother had found it and sat him down for the most embarrassing, uncomfortable two hours of his life telling him about the facts of life all over again and about taking advantage of young girls and on and on. He'd only been fifteen then, but not for three years had he carried another one around. The girls they were dating tonight weren't virgins anyhow, and hadn't been for a long time, so it didn't matter about taking advantage.) Above the single window of the machine which displayed one small match type packet, was written, "The contents of this machine are for the prevention of disease only." But through the "disease" a heavy line was scratched making the word almost illegible, except that Danny knew what it said anyhow, and written above with crayon or some heavy black material was the word "bastards." But Danny had seen that in so many restrooms now that it wasn't even funny anymore. He inserted his quarter, pulled the handle, and pocketed his blue and yellow packet marked, "Spartans." of Danny, his wit and quick ability.

The car was ready when they came back to it. They were on the road again too quickly, it seemed to Danny. Staring out of the

window, he wished he could plan some strategy for tonight, but not knowing this girl Janet he was to date, he could not plan anything. It would have helped for him to be using this riding time to make himself more ready and seemingly more experienced when he finally reached the time, but there wasn't any way. All he could do was listen to talk in the dorms, but there you didn't pick up methods, only terms. Nobody ever spoke about details, nobody ever taught you how, you just knew or were supposed to. With a sport, you studied rules first, then practiced. This was all by ear, something that just had to be learned alone. When he'd kissed his first girl, it had been the same kind of uncertainty. He'd been so nervous he'd kissed only the lower lip and crevice of her chin, and it had felt hard, like kissing rocks. He felt he should know better now, well enough to be at ease, but he was not.

William and he had been dating together for two months and some now, ever since September when they had met at freshman camp right before college began, both of them hiding on the same bus from the counselors searching out the freshman to throw them in the river. He and William had escaped together. William could get Danny dates, being a Southerner and so knowing the girls - or some of them - in the nearby towns. Danny was a Northerner, and sometimes had to admit to himself his ignorance of Southern ways, although he was learning. He depended on William, and William was glad to help, liking the freshness of Danny, his wit and quick ability. Only tonight they would be doing the same thing that Northern boys had done in high school too - or had talked about doing.

Danny himself had always kept a knowing silence when they talked about it this year in the dorm. If you didn't say anything, maybe you knew and just weren't saying. If you said something, you were lying and probably they'd know you were even though William said mostly everyone was lying and bragging so bad that no one could tell for sure. William could tell because he had been screwing for a year anyhow. He, being wise, spotted Danny right off for a virgin but liked him just the same. Danny felt grateful and ashamed. Northerners were supposed to be the sophisticated, intelligent men who knew more than Southerners and learned faster. Southerners were supposed to be the slow, courteous ones. Glancing at William, Danny wondered why he wasn't from the North and Danny from here to make all the traditions be right after all.

The West Virginia roads were to him beautiful. For the three hours they had been driving, he had seen the greenness and the white fences holding it all in to the sides. He especially liked these valleys between the hills which they kept passing, with houses of farm life even better than the Lancaster Hex-signed barns, they had such a peaceful fullness to them. The roads wound almost as much in knots as the old Conestoga trails made into asphalt where he lived, but here they were not so dangerous because hardly ever could ice freeze on them and snow hide the hunks of black asphalt torn out of the way. It would have been his most exciting Thanksgiving vacation ever but for the girl he would have to meet in two hours more. William, sweet William, he had said, "Danny, boy, what are you doing over Thanksgiving?" with his hardly any Southern

accident. And Danny had admitted nothing, knowing what was coming but not how to get away from it. "Then come with me because I want to visit this girl that used to live in my town that now lives up in the mountains and has a cabin - or her mother does - and a friend too." No, oh no, sweet William he had wanted to say, but had been more afraid of saying that than of saying yes. Danny bluffed well; William could never sense his fear of the girl with the friend and the cabin. No one knew he was so uncertain. He had written home that he would be visiting William. They were going to West Virginia. That was all. He was grown enough to be off at school and to make his own vacation decisions. And he needed to learn this that William was going to teach him. No, he couldn't be without knowing how, even if he never did it much for fear of a girl. He liked girls. He dated lots and lots. "Danny, you're cute." or something like that, they always ended up saying. He'd even gone steady and could pet real well. There was just the uncertainty of going farther. But to be able to learn from someone who didn't matter all, whom he would never see again if he didn't want. What better? What better, indeed? He bit his finger around the nail. It was cold to his lips from the wind hitting it. He relaxed, let fall his arm so his hand rested on his knee.

"Hey, William," his hesitant voice, just a little too high to suit Danny, a little less forceful than it should have been, broke the silence of the rushing, brutal wind and the radio between two stations, playing statically because of the mountains around blocking sounds from the valley. "What do they look like?" It

wasn't important; Danny knew the insignificance of the question for himself. Even figure-wise it wouldn't matter so much to him the very first time, except if she were bigger than he. God! He couldn't stand that! He was too slender himself, and was very conscious of his slight build. If she was bigger. But most girls surprised you on the inside. William, dark with dark brown hair and a brown sweatshirt, nodded as if it were the best question Danny could ask. Danny had not asked many questions at all, and William was beginning to be annoyed with the silence; it was not like Danny to keep a long silence. Usually he talked with an ease that seemed to be almost an art. Answering aloud, he used their code comparison. "I'd give Carole - that's mine - about a C+, maybe B-. Janice, yours, well, I've seen her but twice. B- though. More than Carole." Briefly, Danny wondered why he should be having the prettier one. Carlyle, down the hall, gave his girl a C- in looks but was immensely pleased with her just the same. B or above, they were harder to realize - or stupider, one. But why wouldn't William be wanting to trade if this Janice was a B because William liked the upper grades. Always he had. A true Southerner of taste, this William that Danny had met and was riding into the West Virginia mountains with for the girls who shacked up easy and could teach Danny how. "Well," he breathed heavily.

Considering B-, but not any more listening to William talking on once opened up, he fed his hand to the wind and his fight against its force occupied his energies. Even if they would be sore, those wrist bones, it wouldn't matter. No judo tonight. He

cupped the palm, curving and closing his fingers to fight the harder. He wasn't very good at judo anyhow, but better than everyone else and that was enough ahead for the time being. Just to know the straight position of the hand and be able to whack out a few blows of show were enough. He made himself especially strong and good at things whenever he could. Not those brute force games of football, but games where an individual needed to be skilled of himself using craft and coordination and thought. So already he had the record broad jump on the track team and could play tennis and beat anyone at handball. Judo was something new that no one else had yet learned. Nights he would whack a few blows for study breaks - that or dart fights, depending on his mood - but not this night. His hand was handling the wind well, and now he was again wondering could he handle her tonight or when he saw her - actually, her knowledge that he did not have, could he fight her when she had the odds over him?

What would William think if Danny could not pull his chance he was giving over? If he found there was a thing in which Danny was uncertain what would that mean? William was still talking, describing the cabin that Danny would have rather not known of, and all the time driving nearer and nearer to it.

It was really a shack more than a cabin when he saw it. It was too dirty and insignificant to have a log-cabin atmosphere, and besides, it did not look like Abe Lincoln to Danny. Mistrustfully, he walked up to it and peered through the thick, small window's cheap glass. He was looking into the bedroom with

an army blanket spread upon the low double bed. The night stand dresser with mirror above pushed itself room beside the bed along the wall; the room was so narrow that two steps inside the door Danny would have fallen on the bed - which was probably convenient, considering, he thought grimly. William led him through the door - Carole had sent William the pass-key she had taken from her mother's safety deposit box. "She always does that," William explained. "She has to keep the cabin clean, so she takes the keys and her mother doesn't think twice. I'll bet her mother uses it anyhow. She works in the gas station figuring and stuff." Danny thought that William was making a joke and laughed, then William laughed, catching it, realizing at what Danny was laughing, and only a little annoyed that Danny could beat him at his own unconscious joke, but still more admiring than annoyed. Danny always managed to come through, he would have to give him that.

They drove to Carole's house along the dirt path from the cabin while the dust puffed up at them lazily, not having been disturbed for maybe a week. Rocks punched at the tires in the protest Danny shared. At each turn of the wheel he shuddered inwardly; his initiation was coming to him much too quickly. From the cabin to the road was only four miles, but driving as quickly as he could, William still had to ease his car to the highway gently; the rocks and dust would let him go no faster than twenty miles per hour. They hit the highway at seven thirty. It was a small black road of one and a half car lengths wide and with 35 mph posted on yellow signs every mile. Not at all like the four lane

highway on which Danny wished they were now, heading back to school. That highway from whence they had come had been only a mile drive into the dust of the cabin road; there - and back then in time - Danny had not felt the agony of every jolt so closely inside his body. Now he needed a relief for his body which he also knew was impossible for him to attain for an hour more. He might bust inside before then.

"That's the gas station where her mother figures and all," William nodded his head past Danny to a small gas station that proclaimed "We give green stamps" above its sign listing the price of 29.9. "You can see her in there, that broad with the man standing above her. See?" But Danny had not seen as they whizzed past; he had been remarking to himself how wonderful that in a West Virginia-mountain-valley-town the gas station gave green stamps. Advanced communications and modernization - so he had been able only to glance back quickly and shake his head no, he had not seen her, abashed at his ignorance. "Only woman in the whole damn gas station and you don't see her, Danny," mumbled William in disgust. Danny felt the disgust come to him in one light wave of what it would be in less than five hours, probably. Maybe if at the next stoplight he just fell out of the car and broke his leg or if he told William there was some pain in his side - appendicitis - then he would be redeemed before this evening had to start.

William pulled into a driveway to a white - not so white as dirty and then white-washed - house the size of what a big cabin should be but looking like a shack in as bad condition as their

cabin just the same. Out of the car with William, Danny walked slowly behind his friend to the door whose screen was swung open in an expectation of visitors, or maybe no visitors but just flies, to come in. William stood at the door and called, "Hey!" That was all, thought Danny. No magic or charming words like "Open Sesame" for what was already in expectation opened, and there was the girl in long denims and a blue print blouse tucked into the jeans and no shoes on her feet at all. And behind her appeared a blonder girl in a denim dress jumper and a red print blouse. Danny winced, knowing she was his right off. "Come in," said the no-shoes girl. And as she turned herself into the darkness of the house again, Danny could see that the blonder girl was nicer looking and had on shoes, but not shoes really, only those flip-flops or thongs to wear in shower stalls. They were blue; she had large feet, he noted, and he wondered why on a date she would be wearing those thongs; on most dates, unless he would be hiking or something, he wore his best brown shoes and expected his date to wear flats, or loafers, at least. He was insulted, although, he considered uncomfortably, perhaps she didn't consider this a date. But even in that case, no one would have spoken the intention; to end up at the cabin was a silent understanding, and all pertaining to it was the subtle, unmentionable design. It was as if Danny were to take his date to the drive-in; still, even if they both were aware of their destination, they would dress neatly as if going to a theater. Not wanting to stare or be caught staring at her feet, he shifted his glance to the walls of the living room. They

were a dusty beige color and seemed to him to be darker in splotches with dirt having soaked in unevenly, but he could not be sure in the dim light. In places, he could see lines running down the whole stretch of wall, but straight so they could not be cracks, but must be strips of wallpaper pasted down and painted over. Danny looked to William, also still standing, waiting for the two girls to sit down, and saw him motion, waving his hand, for them to have the couch. He and William sat in the two hard-backed chairs opposite while William continued with his description of some dream he had had and to which Danny had not listened, staring at the walls, but came back to now.

"William snores," Danny commented offhandedly - or at least with a try at offhandedness, wanting to break in somehow, to break his tension and the crazy, awkward situation of them like statues. He was usually good at funny-off-hand comments that set up a laughter of ice-breaking. Girls liked him for it, he knew. He made this one to gain their approval and his confidence. But when these girls laughed as any others would have and Carole answered,

"I know," and laughed again, he was lost once more, laughing anyhow not to give himself away, but uncomfortable because he had certainly not expected that, had not expected her to come right out and say a thing like that. William only laughed the harder, seeming to appreciate her forwardness; Danny wished he had been warned. He should have asked William more about them. Janice, as he studied her face, did not seem to him an dishonest person, only a little

stupid and usual. He could tell by the slight glaze to her brown eyes that were staring at him - or nothing - affably. But still she seemed excited and pleased with him, smiling at him anxiously, expectantly, every time he glanced her way. Carole said more; she was relieving. He liked people who talked. He wished the four of them would do something, go someplace - even to the cabin just to get out of this seeming limbo.

"Shall we go?" asked William blandly.

"Yes, let's go to the bar-b-que pit first," Carole said eagerly, reaching for a pair of scuffed flats beside the sofa. "And then we'll show Danny the town." Janice did not change her shoes, Danny noted, but scuffed to the car in thongs.

In the back seat with her, there was a space between them, but not much of one. Just enough, Danny knew that much, for the beginning of an evening. The "Bar-b-que Pit" was a wood box-like structure, unstable and old, ready to fall apart except for the fresh white paint which held it together. Danny had never stopped at a drive-in like this where around the screen flies buzzed and he could smell the grease. But it was cheap eating and the hamburgers weren't so bad, except that he could feel the curious eyes of other customers on him as he ate.

"Oh, never mind them," Carole reassured him flippantly, in a rather loud voice, Danny thought, after William had commented that he felt he was being watched. "They're just curious about you. They've never seen too many college guys around before." Oh, so they're showing us off, Danny realized, not sure he appreciated

the feeling at all.

They drove to the high school from the bar-b-que place, drove around the old stone school that held twelve grades a day, and glided the car softly into the deserted back parking lot. As good as any place, thought Danny. While William and Carole came closer in the front seat, Danny talked, covering his nervousness in a low, earnest voice, listening to Janice's quiet, monotonous answers in return. This girl Janice was not even a senior, but a junior in high school who knew sex better than he did. When he put his arm around her and kissed her lips with too much lipstick - he disliked red lipstick - he did not want to at all. But that was what William was doing in the front seat. He could not close his eyes and feel any warmth, not of passion or of that deeper satisfaction of liking the girl he was kissing that he always wanted to be feeling when he kissed a girl. Still, it was better to be objective about the whole thing, he supposed. After a while of silence and breathing, another car glided alongside of them and William sat straight in the lights it made.

"Let's go," he said starting the car motor, "to the cabin." Ah, thought Danny, well, here it comes at last, anyhow. But Carole shook her head.

"Well, we can't," she mumbled reluctantly.

"Why not?" challenged William while Danny held his breath.

"Because," she blurted forth, "my mother told me if she caught me shacking up with any more boys out at that cabin, she'd come after me with a rifle. And she meant it." In the shocked silence

of William's cringing, blushing body and Janice's half-laugh and Carole's earnest embarrassment, Danny felt his body sink low into a guilty shame. The cushioning under him was hot; his arm around Janice shrank itself slightly away from her. The cabin was supposed to be an unspoken understanding, never verbalized, he knew. And out in the open like that, it made him freeze and heat in shame that for a challenge to his masculinity only, he was ready to shack up - with a junior, a stupid junior. "And," Carole continued awkwardly, "I wouldn't care what she said except we have to drive right by there where she's working at that gas station to get to the cabin. She knows you, William, and will see me with you and will know to come after us."

"Oh," said William. "Well." For a moment's further silence Danny began to realize his release, his safety from the evening that had promised to be an ordeal. He was writing off the challenge with no disgrace. Now a movie, perhaps a drive-in, where he could show out all right and still not let be seen his uncertainty and naivete. "Danny," William was calling to him, "you get up here and drive this car. I'll tell you the way from the back seat. Janice, you too. Carole get in the back. We can duck under at the gas station."

Danny was driving the car he didn't want to be driving to the place he didn't want to be going with William directing him from the back seat. Suddenly there was the gas station on his left and no visible sign of William and Carole in the back seat, only their breathing. Janice giggled. He considered having a deliberate

wreck, but that would have involved the three others, after all. If a flat tire - He kept driving, even onto the dirt road spewing dust and rocks at the car, he kept on at a fast rate. Too fast, but he couldn't control his foot on the gas pedal any better if he'd tried, he knew, so he kept it at the same level, punching rocks brutally. He didn't have to open Janice's door; she was out before he even pulled the key out and switched off the lights. Her eyes met him as he humped out the door in a thumping fear of her. William, he laughed, getting out from the back seat and pulling out Carole after him, and, whispering into Danny's ear, "Go slow" was gone into the shack. Then Danny was in the shack watching William heading Carole into the bedroom without another word. He followed Janice to the sofa. Sitting down cautiously, he eyed her slumped body two cushions away and had no nerve to come closer than he was. Nor desire. Only the shameful disgrace of knowing that he could not do tonight what William had set up for him to do, expected of him. He didn't care to shack up, that's all. Yes, and probably because he was afraid. Of what? Those glazed, teasing eyes of a junior in high school? He didn't want her and he didn't want to want her and he was unsure & very unsure - of how to act whether he did or didn't want her anyhow.

"Do you have any hobbies, Danny?" Janice asked, relaxed and expectant. The light in the back room snapped off. Looking to see where was the light switch in this front room in case it became necessary, he considered what he should answer her that would be

impressing. About sports she wouldn't care or understand and so exhaust the topic too soon. Maybe judo would be good. She would be impressed, in any case, and probably wouldn't know enough about it to realize that he really wasn't very good at it. And maybe from there, if he just acted sure of himself, he'd be alright.

"Judo," he said aloud. "I practice judo some," Her face lighted with an eagerness that pleased him, his masculinity.

"Explain it to me, Danny. I never could understand what you were supposed to do." Trying to explain, he realized that she was not so bad and maybe would not laugh at him so much for his innocence and uncertainty later after the light was out.

"Oh, I can't understand it Danny. You show me, show me some judo." He tried to explain to her that he wasn't so good, hedging, because he would hate to hurt her, but still she teased him, "Oh, come on, Danny. I can take it. Show me some judo." If he showed her well, perhaps she would like him enough to make easier the next step. The light switch was really only the chain hanging from the sixty-watt bulb on the low ceiling. He had only to step up and out three steps and pull, to be in darkness as were William and Carole, but first the judo. Without warning to himself, he raised his arm, elbow straight, hand positioned, and struck lightly, quickly as if the elbow joint were reacting to a funny bone hammered. A good blow, he thought. It did not hardly even touch her neck, yet will startle her enough into believing that I am good at it. He heard her gasping and looked into the empty cushion where she had been. He followed her feet into the sprawled legs into the

body with its mouth gasping, on the floor in front of him.

"Janice!" he cried, not taking time to realize, but bending beside her in anguish. "Are you okay? Hey, I didn't mean-" William came rushing out of the darkness zipping and buttoning angrily. Janice clutched her throat as if to hold in air from an escaping hole, but as Danny touched her she flung out at him with the hand that had seemed glued to the hole so he could see there was really no hole at all. William's face above him laughed in a comprehension for which Danny was grateful, but madder than grateful, feeling undignified. "I was showing her judo. She asked me," he explained, but tersely. Did William have to laugh now? William slapped his back hard and shouted something about Danny, boy, you're great and laughed back into the darkened bedroom from which Carole had not come. And Danny began to laugh too, seeing that Janice was okay and being sprawled out there on the floor. He felt stronger now, sure that the evening would be right now. Janice rose, shoving him backwards against the couch.

"Take your hands off me, you damned bastard," she hissed at him, pulling herself up by grabbing at the couch arm and sitting down violently. She hit the couch hard, punishing it too. Danny, shocked, resumed his place at the other end of the couch - if there had been another piece of furniture in the room, he would have taken it. He shouldn't have laughed when William did, although it was funny. He'd never been called a "damned bastard" by any girl. As he listened to her hard, angry breathing coming in more slowly now, he counted floor boards and thanked god that it was over at least

and that William had laughed, not being disgusted. Wondering had he subconsciously on purpose hit Janice off the couch, he apologized meekly. She glared at him, not speaking at all. From the silence came William's snores. Danny counted four loud ones before Janice jumped off the couch, knocking her cushion off as she left this time, and stomped to the bedroom door. "Get up, dammit, if you're finished, and take me home!" Danny stared at his hand that had performed the judo. Janice leaned against the front door waiting for William to dress; Danny could feel her hatred glaring at him and stared harder at the hand to blot out the awareness of her. Carole did not look so bad as William had coming out of the room. She comforted Janice, indignant and repeating, "He laughed at me. He hit me off the couch and just laughed." But Danny caught her smile when she glanced hastily at him going out the door, and behind Janice's awareness of it.

Danny drove them past the gas station this time too, and saw this time the mother of Carole slumped onto a table in the gas station talking to some greasy man. Janice stared ahead and jumped from the car, gone, as he pulled stopped into the driveway. "It was nice to meet you, Danny," Carole whispered so Janice in the night would not hear. And she too was gone as Danny moved over for William to drive. Danny did not listen too closely to William's admiration for his cool judo trick and how tough it was that Janice got so damn mad she wouldn't cool down, but that Carole had thought it cute and sympathized entirely with him. It's just as well, thought Danny, catching the "She thought you were appealing" and allowing

himself to be somewhat consoled. Far from satisfied, however, he sat uneasily seeing Janice's dull, glazed eyes which had disappeared into the darkness. He had sacrificed her, insulted her to save himself. And Carole's softness - she had thought him cute - she had not realized his naivete. He would have given her the B, or a B+ even, and Janice the C+ that William had given Carole. Well, he'd gotten what he wanted without getting what he didn't want.

"Don't feel badly, Danny, boy," said William. "Over semester break I'll have Carole fix you up again now she knows what you're like. Not some kid with no sense of humour. You need someone with a sense of humour. You have the greatest sense of..."

On and on he went without Danny ever listening past the first. Going back, there was the darkness of the night with the ghosts of the fences holding in those beautiful-to-him West Virginia farms. Too bad it couldn't be daylight now that the pressure was off, and he could enjoy them. Next time he'd go it alone. He'd find his own, not William's, and grade her himself. He looked at his hand gripping the dashboard; he wouldn't be showing any more girls judo for a while, that was for sure. Who needed it, anyhow? He fed the hand to the wind once more to stop the gripping tenseness for good. He didn't fight it; he let it take his hand, whip it back almost to the second window of the car. Then he pulled it in again, no longer tense, only sorry and ashamed. And then, relenting, he listened to William to hear his ego being bolstered even though he knew he was undeserving, even though he could feel the slight apprehension in William's voice. He had won even if he hadn't won. And yet, he was still uncertain.